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EDITORIAL

WHAT IS REALLY REAL?

I chuckle every time I see the caption at the bottom of some television advertisements: “Real people, not actors.” I wonder what “real” means, and I wonder why they are telling me this.

Our little granddaughter likes to watch Bugs Bunny cartoons. At the same time a real jack rabbit plays in her back yard. She watches as he nibbles on the new plants slowly peeking through the snow during a long-awaited spring in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. I wonder if she knows the difference between the “real” rabbit and the cartoon rabbit.

I watch as she plays with her favorite stuffed toy—a blue bunny rabbit with long ears. It reminds me of Margery Williams’ (1986) timeless children’s story, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, in which the toy rabbit asks the toy horse how you become real. And the horse gives the following reply:

It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real [caps in original], most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But those things don’t matter at all, because when you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand. (pp. 14-15)

And then there is reality television. How does that kind of TV compare with the rest of what we see on our screens? What is really real and how do we know the difference? Recently I heard a TV commentator ask how someone in the middle of the tsunami in Asia would make sense of the reality TV show “Survivor.” What does it mean to be a survivor?

We sing, “Jesus Is Real to Me,” and I wonder what makes Jesus real? I’m reminded of the sermon illustration about the actor who recited Psalm 23. It goes like this:

There was once a Shakespearean actor who was known everywhere for his one-man show of readings and recitations from the classics. He would always end his performance with a dramatic reading of Psalm 23. Each night, without exception, as the actor began his recitation—“The

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Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”—the crowd would listen attentively. And then, at the conclusion of the psalm, they would rise in thunderous applause in appreciation of the actor’s incredible ability to bring the verse to life.

But one night, just before the actor was to offer his customary recital of Psalm 23, a young man from the audience spoke up. “Sir, do you mind if tonight I recite Psalm 23?” The actor was quite taken back by this unusual request, but he allowed the young man to come forward and stand front and center on the stage to recite the psalm, knowing that the ability of this unskilled youth would be no match for his own talent.

With a soft voice, the young man began to recite the words of the psalm. When he was finished, there was no applause. There was no standing ovation as on other nights. All that could be heard was the sound of weeping.

The audience had been so moved by the young man’s recitation that every eye was full of tears. Amazed by what he had heard, the actor said to the youth, “I don’t understand. I have been performing Psalm 23 for years. I have a lifetime of experience and training but I have never been able to move an audience as you have tonight. Tell me, what is your secret?”

The young man humbly replied, “Well sir, you know the psalm . . . but I know the Shepherd.” (“Psalm 23,” n.d.)

You may have heard a slightly different version of this story. There are other versions where the one who recites the Psalm is an old man. (For example, see “Wisdom Stories to Live By,” n.d.). I imagine preachers use various versions depending on who their audience is, but it seems to me that it doesn’t matter whether one is young or old, the good shepherd can become real—in fact, He wants to be more real than anything else in our lives. And isn’t that the challenge of our times? To know reality for ourselves and not just act out a script that others expect from us?

With every issue of *JACL*, we ask ourselves, “Are we portraying reality?” Will our readers recognize their situation in the articles we accept? This issue is no different. In the Biblical Reflection, the imagery of a shepherd as leader provides a picture of how Christian leaders relate with their people. The interview with Gordon MacDonald challenges a multi-generational church to listen more carefully to the reality of generations different from our own. The feature articles both show the blurring of the really real with perceptions of reality. In “The Essential Nature of Humility,” we learn how easy it is for Christian leaders to voice support for the biblical concept of humility while at the same time being influenced by enlightenment ideas of individual strengths and accomplishments. We must ask ourselves, “Where is reality in all this?”

Part II of the research on women in Adventist pastoral ministry, women

who are seminary trained and hired full-time by a conference and have together served over 225 years in ministry—that's real! In their own voices they describe what that has been really like. Our Leadership Lived section comes from Africa, where Appiah Kwarteng reflects on the influence of his early life experiences on his leadership today. Do we see evidence that some events in our lives are like a bright-colored thread woven into the fabric of our past, present and future? Is it possible that those enduring beliefs, values or practices are the “really real” in our leadership lives?

The Dialogue section focuses on consumerism, and again we can ask ourselves, “Does this addiction represent something ‘real’ or are the people involved merely ‘actors’ on a stage?” And how might Christian leaders respond? Finally, the book reviews and dissertation abstracts represent a broad spectrum of ideas—with each author clearly endeavoring to describe “reality” in the way he or she sees it.

This leads me to my “reality” and my relationship with *JACL*. I have been privileged for the last five years to work with many others to put together about 10 issues of *JACL*; now the time has come for me to enter more fully into retirement. I have enjoyed working with the writers, the other editors, peer reviewers, design editors, and publishers. My graduate assistants have provided unending support—without them, the *Journal* would have floundered. Together we have been able to do some interesting and creative work. I love our team, but now my grandchildren and children are beckoning me, and I must go. The *Journal* is in good hands—Petr Cincala will be the new Executive Editor and the rest of the team will pretty much stay intact. So, God bless each of you in your leadership ministries. We value your support and trust *JACL* will continue to provide helpful and inspirational reading material. Begin now to anticipate the fall issue—it will be a good one!

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